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BLM - ALASKA
FRONTIERS

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Full of sound and fury

The sunny weather Alaska received in the first half of the summer had a down side. Drought conditions plagued the state and when fingers of lightening reached down and tapped the ground, grasses and other vegetation were ready to spring ablaze. By mid-July, 464 fires had burned 980,000 acres throughout the state.

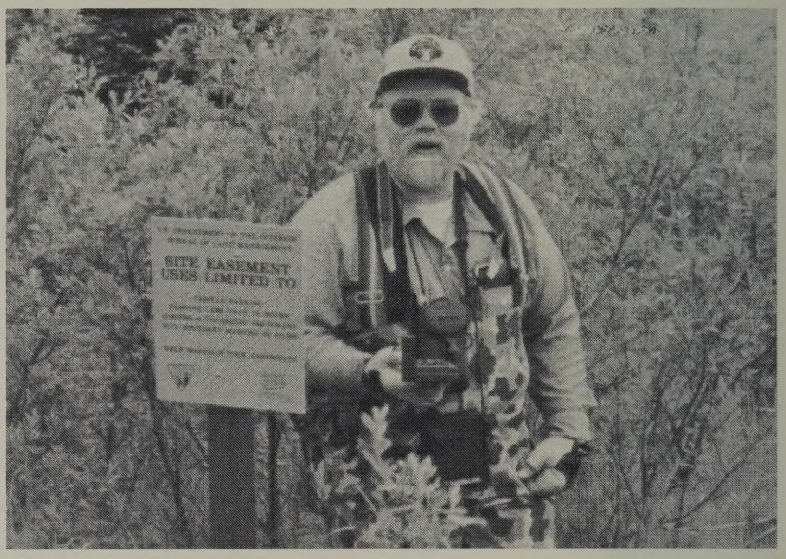
July usually means the beginning of the rainy season in Alaska and this year was no exception. Rain showers helped firefighters battling wildfires in the Interior, and decreased fire activity was reported throughout the state. Firefighters are being sent to the Lower 48, where the fire season is just beginning.

So far this year the Alaska Interagency Coordination Center reports that 465 fires statewide have burned a total of 1,003,411 acres. The AICC coordinates fire management resources for the BLM-Alaska Fire Service and the Alaska Division of Forestry.

Alaska has had a busy fire season this year. Although fire activity began to wind down at the end of July, a total of 465 fires had burned 1,003,410 acres throughout the state. During an average year, about 600,000 acres burn in Alaska.

Council seeks new solution to a not-so-new problem

Easement signs name the specific uses of an easement. Different easement signs mark the different uses allowed.



Users of public easements are advised to read markers carefully since different uses are allowed on various easements. Markers typically spell out these uses in specific detail.

You want to take a summer backpacking trip into a stretch of relatively undisturbed wilderness. You know where you want to go, you're just not sure how to get there since several acres of Alaska Native corporation lands lie between you and your wilderness destination.

Is it legal to cross Native corporation lands to reach public lands? How do you get there without trespassing?

The Alaska Resource Advisory Council (RAC) recently passed a resolution urging BLM to look for answers to these and other questions surrounding a very complex provision of the Alaska Native Claims Settlement Act (ANCSA).

This act directs the conveyance of 44 million acres of land to various Alaska Native corporations. Section 17(b) of ANCSA instructs BLM to reserve public easements across Native-selected lands for access to public lands and major waterways.

BLM works with Native landowners, state and federal agencies, and the public to reserve easements during the conveyance process. But problems surface later if easements are difficult to find, inadequately marked, become degraded beyond use, or result in trespass onto Native lands.

The advisory council includes representatives from Native organizations, wilderness guides and members of the general public who have a direct stake in the management of easements crossing Native corporation lands.

Council member Tom Hawkins of Bristol Bay Native Corporation explains, "The RAC took up the easement issue because it's a favorite political football routinely kicked around by folks who sometimes have less than a full set of facts."

The RAC feels this lack of information — and abundance of misinformation — frequently results in confusion about where easements are located, how they can be used, and what the rights and responsibilities of the user and the landowner are. "We want to see an appropriate balance between the rights of the public and the rights of the private property owners," says Hawkins.

After discussing the issues surrounding easements over the course of several meetings, the council passed a resolution that, in a nutshell, asks BLM to give priority to resolving these and other public easement issues. The resolution recommends that BLM work with Alaska Na-

LIMITED TO:
FOOT, DOGSLED, ANIMALS, SNOWMOBILES, 2 OR 3 WHEEL VEHICLES, ATV TRACK VEHICLES AND 4-WD VEHICLES.

tive organizations, state and federal agencies, and the public to develop a strategy for cooperatively managing public easements. This strategy would define how "17(b)" easements may be used, where they are located, how they will be managed, and which unnecessary public easements may be terminated.

As a first step, BLM formed a three-person team to address the issues raised by the RAC and to review the entire public easement program. The team is meeting with Native corporations, federal and state agencies, and user groups. The issues they are discussing involve the need for joint on-the-ground management, a process to identify and terminate unnecessary easements, and education about the rights and responsibilities of the user.

If developing this strategy sounds like a monumental task, it is; but it won't occur in a vacuum. The BLM team consists of three experienced staff members — Tom Deiling, Terry Hassett and Russ Blome — with extensive backgrounds in land survey, land conveyance and resource management.

"We've met with seven Alaska Native regional corporations so far, and nearly a dozen village corporations," explains Deiling. "We've also met with a few state and federal land management agencies, but the summer field season is underway, so some of the individuals we need to talk to are out doing on-the-ground fieldwork." The team gave a presentation at the Alaska Land Manager's Forum in early July and plans similar presentations to other organizations.

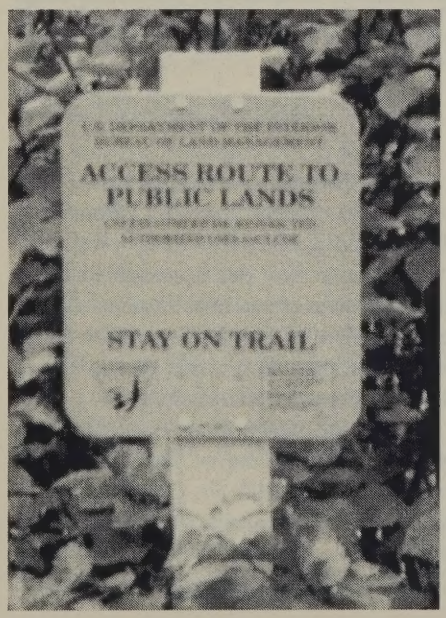
While the information meetings to date have focused on talking with Alaska Native or government entities, public users and user groups will also be asked to provide input. The team plans to contact various user groups interested in access to public lands. Additionally, BLM's Anchorage Field Office is producing an informational video that will explain how easements may be used, how to locate an easement, and the rights and responsibilities of landowners and public land users.

Information on the location of public easements is available at BLM's public information offices in Anchorage and Fairbanks; however, the team is looking at ways to make this information easier for the public to find and understand.

"Most problems occur because of a lack of information," says Deiling. "We feel it's a matter of talking to all the affected parties, learning what the problems are, working together to come up with a fair and practical system for managing easements, and then getting that information out to a wide audience."

Next year is going to be a busy year for the BLM 17(b) team.

— Teresa McPherson



What's a RAC?

The Alaska Resource Advisory Council (RAC) is a 12-member citizens' advisory board that provides advice and counsel to the Secretary of the Interior on issues related to the planning and management of public lands in Alaska.

Chartered in 1995, the Alaska RAC includes a cross section of Alaskans from around the state who represent energy, tourism and commercial recreation interests; environmental, archeological and historic interests; and elected officials, Alaska Native organizations and the general public.

The RAC reaches decisions through consensus; the charter requires any resolution introduced by council members to be approved by the full council before it can be forwarded to the Secretary.

In February 1999, the council did just that when it asked Interior Secretary Babbitt to develop an easement management program in Alaska. The Secretary's Office in turn asked BLM to begin drafting the program. The RAC will track the progress of the 17(b) effort and provide valuable input into this complex issue.

Reduce fire damage with defensible landscaping

Tricia Abbas/USFS

Moving from left to right you can see the effects of defensible space. Number (1) is in an area that was cleared 5 years ago, (2) is in an area that was recently cleared, and (3) shows an area that was not cleared.

"The Donnelly Flats fire made a major run to the north ... forcing the evacuation of Fort Greely and part of Delta Junction. Winds gusting to more than 50 miles an hour pushed the flames past a fire break and into the main post area. The post commander ordered the post evacuated about 10:30 p.m., with families going to Eielson Air Force Base and Fort Wainwright ... ."

—Alaska Interagency Coordination Center
News Release June 14, 1999

Given the intensity of the fire on Fort Greely the evening of June 13, it was amazing that only one structure on the post was destroyed, while six others suffered minor damage. The fire entered the post on the southwest perimeter and literally traveled around the post area.

Over the years, post commanders have been aware of the risk from wildland fires since Ft. Greely sits in the middle of a forest of spruce and hardwoods.

About five years ago an effort was made to create *defensible space* around the residences, mostly on the southwestern perimeter of the post. Fire crews felled and removed all spruce in the understory, but left behind the hardwoods and some of the ground cover. They also cleared debris, twigs, leaves, branches and spruce boughs from the forest floor.

On June 14, the Donnelly Flats Fire made a significant run, severely testing the defensible space around the residences. In the aftermath, the effectiveness of the defensible space efforts was visible.

Looking on the south side of the road where the fire was burning in black spruce, only ash and blackened sticks remain of the trees.

Just north of the road, where the spruce was removed five years ago, the hardwoods bordering the road and some of the understory were scorched, but the fire did not proceed into those fuels.

Defensible space

Your first defense against wildland fire is to create a "fire safe" landscape around your home. If you are able to create this buffer for at least 30 feet around your house, you will reduce the chance of a wildland fire spreading into your property and burning through to your home.

This "defensible space" will help protect your home and provide a safety zone for the firefighters who are battling the flames.

It does not mean you have to live with a ring of bare dirt around your home. You can create a defensible space by removing and replacing highly flammable vegetation with more fire resistant varieties.

In the area that was cleared only hours before the fire arrived, the fire scorched the trees and was carried in the understory, but it lost enough of its momentum that it did not reach the residences.

Just east of the defensible space, the fire crossed the road and burned unabated in black spruce with no visible difference between the north and south sides of the road.

Many of us think that to be effective we have to clear out all vegetation to create defensible space; not so. At Fort Greely, the highly flammable spruce and dead materials were removed, leaving the less flammable hardwoods. The area maintained its forested look while serving as a very effective fire break.

—Anne Jeffery

Juneau celebrates Gold Rush days

Darrel VandeWeg explains rock and fossil specimens at the annual Gold Rush Days celebration in Juneau.

The tenth annual Juneau Gold Rush Days celebration was held June 26 and 27. The event is organized by the Juneau Gold Rush Commission. Although it was originally a miners' picnic, loggers began competing in 1993, and it is now a major logging and mining event for the town of Juneau.

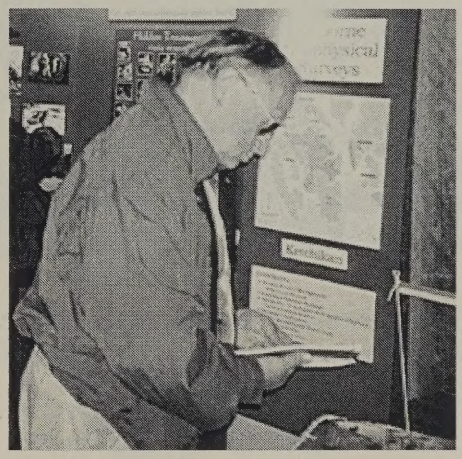
Traditional mining competitions, such as jack leg drilling, hand mucking and spike driving; and logging contests, such as logrolling, log-chopping and speed climbing are popular events.

In addition to the competitive events, there is the Ruth Roberts Children's Carnival, complete with gold panning, a breakfast hosted by the Alaska Miners Association, the Moose Lodge picnic, plus other food vendors.

BLM's Juneau Mineral Information Center hosted a booth for the third year in a row, and had close to 500 guests. Visitors could get a free Hidden Treasures - Alaska Minerals poster, among other publications.

Also available were mineral and fossil specimens from Southeast Alaska, complete with explanations by a geologist. This feature was probably the most popular item at the booth and helped to attract interest.

Feel free to also visit the Juneau Mineral Center online at: http://juneau.ak.blm.gov.



Visitors came to the BLM Juneau Minerals Information Center booth at Juneau's Gold Rush Days celebration.

The Juneau Mineral Informaton Center was centrally located under the tent.

Swiftwater rescue training pays off on Gulkana

Shown here as they finish restuffing the throwbags they used on the Fourth of July river patrol are Jason Roberts (left), Brad Seifert, Shannon Frazee and Heath Emmons (r).

What's a "throwbag?"

After returning from a river trip, reports must be filed, equipment maintained and gear stowed. After thoroughly drying their ropes and bags, the river crew carefully stuffs each rope back into its own throwbag so it will be ready for the next "perfect" throw, if needed. By holding the throwbag and launching the rope through a hole at one end, with practice, swiftwater rescue technicians can quite accurately aim and land one end of the rope on target.

"It all happened so fast," recalls Heath Emmons, seasonal outdoor recreation technician for the Glennallen Field Office (GFO), as he describes a recent canoe capsizing incident, "but we were set up perfectly. The woman thanked us afterwards and said we saved her life."

The Fourth of July holiday weekend draws many visitors to the Gulkana National Wild River. For the past several years, the GFO has stationed seasonal recreation program employees and volunteers, each trained as a swiftwater rescue technician, at the Canyon Rapids area of the river.

In addition to Emmons, outdoor recreation planner Brad Seifert, and Student Conservation Association volunteers Shannon Frazee and Jason Roberts were performing maintenance tasks and gathering visitor-use data at the portage area when they found themselves providing emergency assistance to a pair of canoeists who flipped over rocks in the "picket fence" area leading into the rapids. The picket fence area is named for the numerous rocks across the river channel, similar to a fence. Roberts describes the rescue: "The bow of the canoe went right up into a "V" rock, then the stern swung around into another rock and turned over. Heath and I threw ropes to them."

Roberts adds, "At first, the man held on to the rope with one hand and tried to bring the canoe along as he was being pulled out. With the current, it was just too much weight and we had to get them to let go of the canoe. There was a tense moment when the woman's foot became entrapped and she let go of her rope. In order to help her, the man let go of his rope. Once she was free, they floated together in the current and rolled over the falls."

Crew leader Siefert was stationed below the falls and was already standing thigh deep in the river, watching for the pair. "The man had his hand extended and I grabbed it; I tossed my throwbag to the woman, and she managed to catch it and I hauled both of them out."

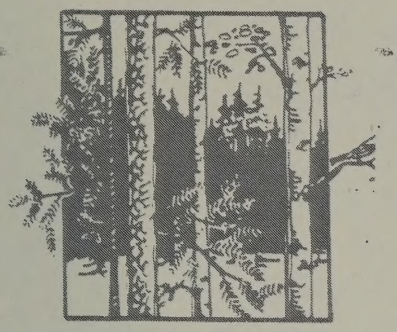
In the flurry of activity, the crew didn't get the names of the couple, but notes that one of the pair claimed to have made the same trip at least 15 times, while the other was an inexperienced canoeist.

"An accident can happen to anyone in an instant — even to those with experience," says GFO outdoor recreation planner Marcia Butorac. "That's why BLM recommends that novice boaters not attempt the Gulkana, and advises all river users to know their limits and come prepared."

For more information on the Gulkana National Wild River, visit BLM's website at: www.ak.blm.gov/gdo/gulkana1.html.

—KJ Mushovic

No digging, please

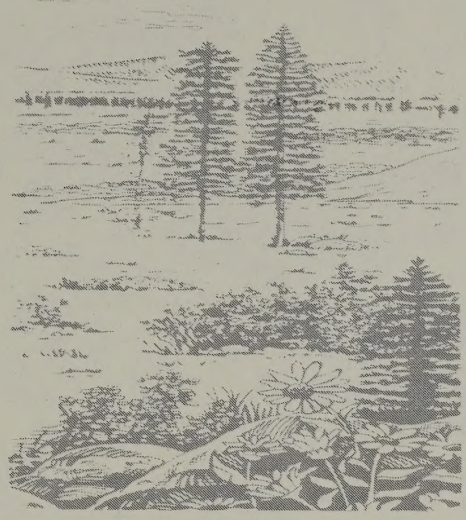


In late June, several sapling cottonwoods mysteriously found their way from the BLM's Campbell Tract in Anchorage to a nearby neighborhood. After their move, the trees diligently went to work providing a buffer zone between new homes and Abbott Loop Road.

BLM law enforcement officer Dave Stimson investigated the incident and issued a citation to the parties responsible for the unauthorized relocation of the cottonwoods. "A landscaper working for a local construction company intended to remove trees on the company's lands adjacent to the Campbell Tract," Stimson explains. "Apparently, they were a little confused about the boundaries and removed young trees from BLM lands."

Stimson says BLM manages the 730-acre Campbell Tract in ways that are compatible with the adjoining Far North Bicentennial Park, which means providing full protection of the natural resources on the tract. This makes it illegal to cut firewood or remove trees or any other vegetation from the area. Δ

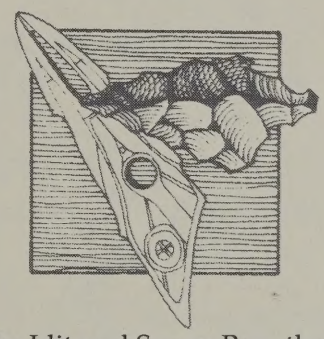
Iditarod Trail picked for Millennium Trails Program



BLM fared very well at the International Trails and Green Ways Conference this year. Selections for the National Millennium Trails Program were announced at the conference which was organized by the Rails-to-Trails Conservancy. BLM assumes trail or land management or advisory responsibilities for six of the sixteen trails selected. One of these trails is the Iditarod National Historic Trail (INHT).

The purpose of the Millennium Trails initiative is to spark the creation and enhancement of more than 2,000 trails throughout the nation. This public/private partnership is led by the Department of Transportation, the Rails-to-Trails Conservancy, and a collaboration of other agencies and organizations.

Having the INHT selected for the Millennium Trails Program may help boost fund-raising for the newly-formed nonprofit group, INHT, Inc., as more people become aware of the need to restore and preserve the INHT. Surveyed in 1908 by the federal government, the Iditarod is America's only remaining frontier trail. Its 938 miles connect remote settlements to each other, and mark the way for the Klondike Gold Rush and the Iditarod Sled Dog Race held each year in March. People explore the trail year round via all modes of conveyance, including watercraft where the trailway has melted, and sled, snowshoe, snowmobile or cross country skiing in the winter



the Iditarod Serum Run, the building of the Alaska Highway, and life in the prehistoric past.

The publication was recently adopted as a required resource by the lower Kuskokwim School District, centered in Bethel. It is also being used less formally in other states, such as in some schools in West Virginia, where it is used to teach about Alaska.

BLM's cultural resources program involves Heritage Education outreach to schools, which includes work with the Project Archaeology Program — a nationwide, multi-agency/private partner effort. Δ

Handbook uses time travel and fiction to teach archaeology

An educational resource produced by BLM has become required reading in some school districts. In 1996, BLM published a special educational supplement for students in grades four through seven, called *Intrigue of the Past: Discovering Archaeology in Alaska*. BLM state archaeologist Robert King coauthored the project with Karen Laubenstein, who is employed at the U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service in Anchorage.

The handbook is written as a novel for children, and involves the adventures of a fictional family coming to Alaska. Their children learn about Alaska's history and archaeology, partly through time travel. The children go back and participate in

Lee's Cabin reopens

Lee's Cabin, located about seven miles from the Elliott Highway in the White Mountains National Recreation Area, reopened in late June following a six-week closure for repairs. The cabin was severely damaged by vandals in early May.

The damage, estimated at $5,000, included the theft of the cabin axe and logbook, and the destruction of the water-caching system, stove, kitchen counter, trail signs, trees, lantern, windows and door. It took a BLM repair crew four days to restore things to a usable condition. "This is our most popular cabin and people around here are very upset about this," says BLM recreation planner Collin Cogley. "I've been talking to a lot of people who are wanting to know if we got the culprits. They are very interested in seeing them caught."

BLM is still investigating the case. Anyone with helpful information should contact BLM district ranger Ed Lee at (907)474-2367.

The cabin is used year-round by Boy Scouts, dog mushers, skiiers, hikers and snow machine riders. To stay at Lee's Cabin or one of the nine other cabins in the White Mountains, reservations must be made in advance and a nightly user fee is charged. Call (800) 437-7021 or, in Fairbanks, call 474-2251 for further information. Δ

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